

Cooper Arnold, RI - 2021

Many people have asked me to sum up what I learned during the Senate Youth Program and, in the beginning, I would give rather boring answers. There were no words I could find that would perfectly encapsulate all the skills and lessons that were learned throughout the program. There came a time, perhaps after the tenth person asked about it, when I wanted to stop being boring. I am an exciting guy, usually, but boy was I giving some boring responses. It was at this point where I decided to reflect back on my notes and unearth the answer. Thanks to Justice Clarence Thomas, I found it.

Justice Thomas is an incredibly intellectual man...and an incredibly funny one at that. Justice Thomas, of course, tends to be labeled as one of the most conservative justices on the Court. He would often rule in agreement with my favorite Justice, Justice Antonin Scalia, which naturally made me fond of Justice Thomas as well. Being a conservative, much like being a liberal, there will be people that disagree with certain arguments or viewpoints. At one point a delegate asked Justice Thomas why he adopted a more conservative point of view in life. He responded with, "I grew up." Now, being conservative myself, that was an absolutely hilarious answer. It was so off the cuff, so genuine, so surprising, and so lighthearted that I could do nothing but laugh. In my notes I immediately wrote, "very likable man." Now, is this the answer to me solving my boring responses to questions about the United States Senate Program? No, but it certainly highlights a side of Justice Thomas that many people never get a chance to see, and that is the joy of this program.

Justice Thomas did, however, deliver one line that perfectly describes what I learned and gain at the USSYP. He said, "It is not enough to yell or scream about [something], but to think about it." Having one hundred and four students from around the country will naturally bring opposing beliefs on endless topics. However, unlike many other situations, we are one hundred and four delegates who are well versed in our arguments and uneasily swayed. We are, of course, all seriously interested in government, in current affairs, and what we believe. This can, obviously, be frustrating. We can no longer use our oratory skills or sense of humor to sway people, for we have all rooted ourselves in a certain set of beliefs. Often, people feel passionate about very important topics and the urge is to scream, to be angry, or to be upset when they are contradicted. Ralph Waldo Emerson has a great quote I often repeat to myself, "Let me never fall into the vulgar mistake of dreaming that I am persecuted whenever I am contradicted." The United States Senate Youth Program has bolstered that ideal within me. Changing people's minds or understanding their arguments cannot happen with screaming and yelling, but rather with thinking. I met numerous different speakers, many of which carried differing opinions than mine, yet to understand them, to learn from them, I thought about their ideas rather than disregarding them. The USSYP teaches delegates to think, and that is the greatest gift mankind has ever been given (second only to Mr. Steve Cox).